PROSPECT,

OR

View of the Moral World,

BY ELIHU PALMER.

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Comments upon the sacred writings of the Jews and Christians: Genesis, Chapter the third.

CREATION OF MAN.

(Continued from our last.)

THE mythological matters contained in this chapter form the basis of a system of religion, which has extended itself over a considerable portion of the globe, and involved within its baneful vortex two hundred and fifty millions of the human species. When reason, however, takes a view of the prominent ideas and features herein exhibited, it will easily perceive that fiction, extravagance, and absurdity, are visible upon the very face of the record. It is pretended that the matter of the primitive apostacy, or what is commonly called the fall of man, is here unfolded with moral and theological correctness—but we shall prove in this comment that it is destitute of both of these properties, and presents such singular departures from the laws of propriety and the principles of truth, as must necessarily annihilate all divinity of character. This system of religion proceeds upon the supposition, that the creator had given to the first parents of the human race, a restrictive command, relative to a certain fruit in the garden of Eden, annexing at the same time to the breach of this command the positive penalty of immediate death. In the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die—but they did eat and did not die upon the same day, nor for many days and years afterwards. Subsequent to the command which God gave, it seems that there appeared to the woman a loquacious serpent, denouncing the character and impeaching the integrity of the most high. This speaking

serpent ventures to affirm in opposition to the celestial mandate that death should not be the consequence of their disobedience—for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as Gods, knowing good and evil.

By what means had this serpent the powers of speech? It was not an inherent and essential property of his nature; but it was the devil, say the theologicians that entered the serpent, and produced this marvellous event! it is evidently an event of a miraculous kind, and therefore should be examined in its relation to the several characters herein mentioned. In the first place we know that the serpent could not speak without some extraneous assistance of an extraordinary nature. Now the laws of the physical universe, are as immutable as God their author—to presume therefore that the devil has the power of arresting or violating these laws, is to place him upon an equal footing with the creator, cause him to usurp the authority of Jehovah himself. All the devils in the infernal regions, if any there be, have not the power to make a serpent or any other beast of the field, articulate a single word in manner and form similar to the human voice. But this serpent it is said was more subtle than any other beast of the field—what then? Does it follow from this that he could talk? No, nothing short of the supernatural power of God could give him the power of utterance, nor even this without involving the divine attributes in absurdity of operation and inconsistency of character.—But suppose for a moment that God had lent his aid in this case, which is the only means by which the serpent could speak, what consequences would follow? It will be recollected that the creator had before threatened the violaters of his command with death—if therefore he told them in one place that they should die, and impowered the serpent in another place to tell them that they should not die—this amounts to a contradiction. It is God, *versus* the miraculous power of God, and what is worse than all the rest, in the character of a deceiver too! But this strange account goes on involving the honest and discerning enquirer, in still farther difficulties—for it is stated that the woman took a view of this delicious but forbidden fruit, and when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat. The account then states, that the eyes of both of them were opened, and

they knew that they were naked. It was after they had eaten that they came to their sight, and yet the woman before she had touched the fruit is represented as standing gazing at it, admiring its beauty and capacity to produce wisdom! What strange contradiction is this? Madam Eve must surely had a very keen eye when she could see the fruit upon the tree with both of her eyes shut! This it is presumed is one of the mysteries of Godliness, and not to be explained or understood by vulgar minds. But further it is upon this extravagant fable, that all the monstrous absurdities of revealed religion have been established and propagated for eighteen centuries, throughout the christian world. The doctrine of original sin, as unjust in its nature, as it is derogatory to the character of God, has originated from this source. It is unjust, however, that one being should suffer for the crimes of another—moral merit or demerit, is personal and not transferable. It adheres solely to the criminal agent, and theology in this respect, is incapable of destroying the just and essential discriminations of the moral world. If the progenitors of the human race, had transgressed in manner and form herein stated, it is no reason that their guilt should descend with all its dreadful consequences to millions of unborn posterity. Reason has marked out to itself a line of eternal justice, and the character of God is in coincidence with this line, because he is the author of reason. Let the fictions of past ages be subjected to the peaceful and bold inquiries of mind, and they will soon descend to the tomb of oblivion, leaving man in the full exercise of his intellectual powers, and that sublime happiness to which he is justly intitled.

(To be Continued.)

APHORISMS.

INTEGRITY is the first trait in the human character—the dishonest man is ever providing for himself a hell of torments.

An inviolable attachment to truth is the first duty of an intelligent being; whoever shrinks from his duty is either weak or wicked.

SYMPATHY, probity, fortitude, and wisdom, are the prominent features of an excellent character.

RELIGION without morals is good for nothing—but pure MORALITY, independent of theological dreams, will bind man fast to the great point of utility and happiness.

CHRISTIAN HERESIES.

'TIS certain, that no sooner did christianity appear, but factions, parties and heresies immediately sprung up, and have ever remained, and are ever likely to do so, as long as it exists. What's the meaning of this? Truth is clear and plain, uniform and harmonious—but error is obscure and intricate, everlastingly dividing and subdividing itself, an inexhaustible fund of disagreement and contention. When truth is expressed to look like error, that is not to be understood—it may be productive of the same ill consequences as error is, but then error is the occasion of it, that is, the error of expression; and if truth puts on the garb and appearance of error, no wonder if it be mistaken for it, and have the same influence. One would think, that the truth of God would appear like him, good, bright, and lovely—for truth delights not to put on the garb of error, nor does wisdom love to wear the mask of folly, nor is it the property of real goodness to sculk in the shades of darkness, and hide itself in obscurity. It is not the nature of love and piety to produce contentions, envying, heresies and persecutions—its nature is to send peace on earth, not fire and sword; nor is it disposed to kindle the one, nor does it advise to sell one's garment to buy the other.

A religion founded on bare authority, not conducted by the choice of reason, will admit of innumerable pretentions and impostures. Hence arises the exceeding difficulties of distinguishing right from wrong, truth from falsehood: But if we take reason and nature for our guide the distinction will be clear and easy.

Ever since the revelation of christianity, different sects have risen up among them: the weeds of heresies have plen-

tifully sprouted out of this ground, but the true plant among christians is hard to be found ; they had ever more credulity than wisdom, and more zeal than virtue. Each sect have always thought it right to do wrong, *i. e.* to advance the gospel or their party, by forging falshoods or concealing truth.

Nothing is plainer, than that the New Testament books received their sanction from the authority of the church only, for none but the church ever received them at all. And what makes any doctrines be called orthodox, but the success the maintainers have had, who call themselves the catholic church, by suppressing all others, and why are others deemed or damned for heretics by the triumphant party, but because the suffering party cannot help themselves. The armour of faith, without the carnal sword, does not compleat the wedding garment of the church militant. Nothing but success can distinguish orthodoxy from heresy—for where both sides are positive they are right, and the proof is on no side, power only can determine the controversy. There can be no other right to orthodoxy where there is none in the reason and nature of things, and neither side can find a proof there: they cannot submit to be tried by that court whose authority is condemned by them all, because it favors none: For positive precepts and doctrines pretended to be given by that court above, *i. e.* a supernatural court, refuse all trial by the inferior court of nature. This is the presumptive authority of all heresy. That party which rises as by the fortune of war, and vanquishes the rest, calls itself orthodox, which is but another word for conqueror, and the vanquished party is consequently declared heretical. Orthodox therefore is only triumphant heresy; and the authority of the fathers which are on their side, are no more right, than the usurpation of mother church is, so that nothing can be proved true from that quarter. Had the vanquished heretics prevailed, their ancient teachers had been fathers of the church, their doctrines had been orthodox, and their gospels, epistles, acts, and revelations would have had the sanction of the inspiration of the spirit—since the defenders of every ancient heresy espoused some books peculiar to themselves, that were so called. Every sect received such books for canonical, as were for their purpose, or made them so—and the victorious party burnt and destroyed, as far as they were able, all that they disliked. *Cyril* of *Jerusalem* advises his catechumen to reject all sacred books not contained in his catalogue, and not to read them. The same the council of *Laodicea*, in the middle of the fourth century. The earliest chris-

tians, viz. the Nazarines, Ebionites, Cerinthians, Nicolaitans Valentinians, Menandrians, Carpocratians, Montanists, Gnostics, Manicheans, Cerdonites, Marcionites, Tatianites, &c. are all condemned for heretics by the other sects, and those lived after them, and so were almost all of the first century, except Christ and the apostles, by the rising orthodox of succeeding centuries. The fathers of the church, from whose credit the canonical books are received, lived about the beginning of the third century—a dark time to depend upon for light; and darker followed, which clouded that, and all that went before it.

If books are to be received as God's word by his positive command, we ought to be positively sure of them, or no imposition and deceit is more easy. If the canon of the scripture depends upon tradition, then it depends upon human authority—but that which is divine, must rest upon its own intrinsic worth: this is the only rule of judging its truth and purity.

Of the suppression of erroneous opinions of Religion and Government.

IGNORANCE is not necessary to render men virtuous. If it were, we might reasonably conclude that virtue was an impostor, and that it was our duty to free ourselves from its shackles. The cultivation of the understanding has no tendency to corrupt the heart. A man who should possess all the science of Newton and all the genius of Shakespear, would not on that account be a bad man. Want of great and comprehensive views had as considerable a share as benevolence in the grief of Cato. It is like the taking to pieces an imperfect machine in order by reconstructing it to enhance its value. An uninformed and timid spectator would be alarmed at the temerity of the artist, at the confused heap of pins and wheels that were laid aside at random, and would take it for granted that nothing but destruction would be the consequence. But he would be disappointed. It is thus that the extravagant sallies of mind are the prelude of the highest wisdom, and that the dreams of Ptolemy were destined to precede the discoveries of Newton.

The event cannot be other than favourable. Mind would else cease to be mind. It would be more plausible to say that the perpetual cultivation of the understanding will terminate in madness, than that it will terminate in vice. As long as enquiry is suffered to proceed, and science to improve, our knowledge is perpetually increased. Shall we know every thing else, and nothing of ourselves? Shall we become clear sighted and penetrating in all other subjects, without increasing our penetration upon the subject of man! Is vice most truly allied to wisdom or to folly? Can mankind perpetually increase in wisdom, without increasing in the knowledge of what it is wise for them to do? Can a man have a clear discernment, unclouded with any remains of former mistake, that this is the action he ought to perform, most conducive to his own interest and to the general good, most delightful at the instant and satisfactory in the review, most agreeeble to reason, justice, and the nature of things, and refrain from performing it?

Secondly, it is a mistake to suppose that speculative differences of opinion threaten materially to disturb the peace of society. It is only when they are enabled to arm themselves with the authority of government, to form parties in the state, and to struggle for that political ascendency which is too frequently exerted in support of or in opposition to some particular creed, that they become dangerous. Wherever government is wise enough to maintain an inflexible neutrality, these jarring sects are always found to live together with sufficient harmony. The very means that have been employed for the preservation of order, have been the only means that have led to its disturbance. The moment government resolves to admit of no regulations oppressive to either party, controversy finds its level, and appeals to argument and reason, instead of appealing to the sword or the stake. The moment government descends to wear the badge of a sect, religious war is commenced, the world is disgraced with inexplicable broils and deluged with blood.

Thirdly, the injurtice of punishing men for their opinions and arguments will be still more visible, if we reflect a little on the nature of punishment. Punishment is one of those classes of coertion, the multiplication of which is so much to be deprecated, and which nothing but the most urgent necessity can in any case justify. That necessity is commonly admitted to exist, where a man has proved by his unjust actions the injuriousness of his character, and where

the injury, the repetition of which is to be apprehended is of such a nature, as to be committed before we can have sufficient notice to guard ourselves against it. But no such necessity can possibly exist in the case of false opinions and perverse arguments. Does any man assert falsehood? Nothing farther can be desired than that it should be confronted with truth. Does he bewilder us with sophistry? Introduce the light of reason, and his deceptions will vanish.—There is in this case a clear line of distinction. In the only admissible province of punishment force it is true is introduced, but it is only in return for force previously exerted. Where argument therefore, erroneous statements and misrepresentation alone are employed, it is by argument only that they must be encountered. We should not be creatures of a rational and intellectual nature, if the victory of truth over error were not ultimately certain.

GODWIN.

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Will be delivered by the Editor of this paper, on Tuesday evening next, at 7 o'clock, at Shepherd's Long-Room, Druid's grove Tavern, No. 11, George-street.

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